

# America's long war against Syria

by Professor Glenn Diesen,\* Norway



Glenn Diesen.  
(Picture ma)

Over the years, the US and NATO have developed a template for regime change under the guise of defending liberal democratic values. Initially, there are efforts to sow divisions within the targeted state and then provide political, economic and

military support to opposition groups. If the opposition groups can topple the government, then the US and NATO celebrate it as a “democratic revolution” over an authoritarian government. If the government defeats the opposition groups, the US or NATO can intervene militarily under the justification of preventing the government from “killing its own people”. This model was also applied to Syria in what became a long war.

## Dividing and Destabilising Syria

The US began manufacturing ethnic divisions in Syria and laying the foundation for a civil war in the 1980s. A declassified CIA memo from 1986 reveals a strategy for fomenting ethnic divisions in Syria to carry out a regime change:

“We believe that a renewal of communal violence between Alawis and Sunnis could inspire Sunnis in the military to turn against the regime... Excessive government force in quelling such disturbances might be seen by Sunnis as evidence of a government vendetta against all Sunnis, precipitating even larger protests by other Sunni groups. Although the regime has the resources to crush such a venture, we believe brutal attacks on Sunni civilians might prompt large numbers of Sunni officers and conscripts to desert or stage mutinies in support of dissidents, and Iraq might supply them with sufficient weapons to launch a civil war.”<sup>1</sup>

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When the Cold War ended in 1989 and the Soviets became passive, the US sought to take advantage by eliminating undefended Soviet allies. After the first Gulf War in 1991, the US Undersecretary of Defence for Policy at the time, *Paul Wolfowitz*, argued the US had to clean up the region while it was in a dominant position:

“With the end of the Cold War, we can now use our military with impunity. The Soviets won’t come in to block us. And we’ve got five, maybe 10, years to clean up these old Soviet surrogate regimes like Iraq and Syria before the next superpower emerges to challenge us.”<sup>2</sup>

After the September 11 attacks in 2001, Syria was targeted in a string of opportunistic wars. The former highest commander of NATO, US General *Wesley Clark*, revealed that he was handed a memo that

“describes how we’re going to take out seven countries in five years. Starting with Iraq, and then Syria, Lebanon, Libya, Somalia, Sudan and finishing off Iran.”<sup>3</sup>

After the invasion of Iraq, the focus began to shift towards destroying Syria as Iran’s land-bridge to support Lebanon and Palestine. In 2005, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that the “Pressure for regime change in Damascus is rising”, and former Pentagon advisor *Richard Perle* highlighted the opportunity that “Assad has never been weaker, and we should take advantage of that”.<sup>4</sup> In an interview with President *Bashar Al-Assad* in 2005, CNN reporter *Christiane Amanpour* spoke openly about the plans for regime change in Syria:

“Mr. President, you know the rhetoric of regime change is headed towards you from the United States. They are actively looking for a new Syrian leader. They’re granting visas and visits to Syrian opposition politicians. They’re talking about isolating your diplomatically and, perhaps, a coup d’état or your regime crumbling. What are you thinking about that?”<sup>5</sup>

Washington’s propaganda efforts to exploit ethnic and religious divisions focused primarily on grievances of the Kurdish minority and the fears of Sunni Muslims being subordinated by Shia Muslims due to Syria’s partnership with Iran.<sup>6</sup> A leaked cable from the US embassy in Syria in 2006 recommended to “play on Sunni fears of Iranian influence” even though the fear of Iran is

“often exaggerated”, and the US should work with Saudi Arabia and Egypt to “publicize and focus regional attention on the issue”.<sup>7</sup> The US embassy advocated to encourage an uprising, and simultaneously create fears in the government about a coup as it “increases the possibility of a self-defeating over-reaction”.<sup>8</sup> A cycle of violence could thus be instigated and exacerbated.

RAND Corporation, a US think tank aligned closely with the intelligence community, also presented a strategy of dividing Syrian society with “covert action, information operations, unconventional warfare” to pursue a “divide and rule” strategy. RAND advocated that the US should “capitalise on the ‘Sustained Shia-Sunni Conflict’ trajectory by taking the side of the conservative Sunni regimes against [Iran-allied Shiite empowerment movements in the Muslim world]”. The report also recognised how terrorists could be used: “The geographic area of proven oil reserves coincides with the power base of much of the Salafi-jihadist network.”<sup>9</sup>

### The War Begins

The war against Syria was finally unleashed in 2011 as proxies were activated. A New York Times article confirmed that the CIA had spent more than a billion dollars to arm and train rebels against the Syrian government, with much of the weapons ending up in the hands of the jihadist group Al-Nusra that fought alongside CIA-backed fighters.<sup>10</sup> The media sold the events as the government attacking peaceful protesters.

A Pentagon report from August 2012 confirms that US military planners anticipated that jihadists would seek to establish territorial control in Eastern Syria:

“If the situation unravels there is the possibility of establishing a declared or undeclared Salafist Principality in Eastern Syria (Hasaka and Deir Ezzor), and this is exactly what the supporting powers to the opposition want, in order to isolate the Syrian regime, which is considered the strategic depth of the Shia expansion (Iraq and Iran).”<sup>11</sup>

*Roland Dumas*, the former Foreign Minister of France, argued that the British contributed to American efforts in 2009 by financing regional “gunmen”, which was motivated by oil interests and as a geopolitical move against Iran.<sup>12</sup>

*Peter Ford*, the former British Ambassador to Syria from 2003 to 2006, similarly criticises his own government for the “incoherent and grotesque” policies towards Syria. Ford argues that the war in Syria was started and perpetuated by a Western regime-change agenda, which resulted in using jihadi terrorists as proxies.<sup>13</sup>

When Russia intervened in 2015 to rescue the Syrian government, the US sought to pull Russia into a long war to drain its resources. The US representative to Syria, *James Jeffrey*, argued that the objective of the US in Syria was to create an enduring conflict to weaken Russia:

“My job is to *make* it a quagmire for the Russians.”<sup>14</sup>

*Dana Stroul*, the Democratic co-chair of the *Syria Study Group*, argued in November 2019 that the US objective was to control Syrian natural resources as a source of influence over any future political settlement, and to obstruct reconstruction aid to ensure that the government-controlled territory remains a “rubble”.<sup>15</sup>

The regime change was eventually successful in December 2024 as Syria had been weakened, Turkey had prepared a jihadist proxy army, Russia was distracted by a long war in Ukraine, and



Israel had weakened Hezbollah in Lebanon. While the proxy war has gone through different stages, the media has consistently and diligently sold the narrative of an organic grassroots movement of democratic forces rising against the Syrian dictatorship. The US allegedly represented the “international community”, a reluctant and virtuous defender of the Syrian people.

Source: <https://glennndiesen.substack.com/p/americas-long-war-against-syria>, 17 December 2024

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